

CONSUMER REPORT



STATE SENATOR 13th District

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CONSUMER PROTECTION WEEK – MARCH 7-13, 2010

“Protecting consumers – a top priority for Senate lawmakers.”

This interactive report details recent Senate action on consumer protection and safety.



Pappageorge supports ban on texting while driving

The National Safety Council estimates that more than 28 percent of all traffic crashes are caused by drivers using cell phones and texting. That's at least 1.6 million accidents each year.

New legislation approved by the Senate last month would help keep our roadways safer.

Senate Bills 468 and **402** make reading, writing or sending a text message while driving a secondary offense, and establish fines for violators. The bills await consideration in the House.

Texting while driving is a major distraction and, according to Car and Driver magazine, more dangerous than drinking and driving.

Let's all drive like our family is in the next car and keep our eyes on the road!

TIP: Make road trips easier. Prepare for seasonal road construction projects and lane closures at www.michigan.gov/mdot.

Senate provides more protection from utility shutoffs

New laws that took effect earlier this year will help protect Michigan residents, especially seniors and the disabled, from utility shut-offs.

Public Acts 171-174 of 2009 (**Senate Bills**

554 and **557**; House Bills 4658 and 4673) ensure that municipal utilities give fair notice to residents before their heat or electricity service is stopped.

Utilities are also required to check whether a customer is a senior citizen or if someone in the household has a medical emergency that would be life threatening if the power was interrupted.

The legislation was spurred by the death of an elderly Bay City man last year after his power was shut off.



TIP: Access the Michigan Energy Assistance Directory for energy efficiency tips and information on energy assistance programs at www.dleg.state.mi.us/mpsc/winterwise/energy_assistance.htm.

Senate strengthens mortgage loan officer licensing

Mortgage fraud can devastate homeowners and communities.

Public Acts 75-78 of 2009 (**Senate Bills 462-465**) add licensing requirements for loan officers that will help protect consumers from the few bad actors who prey on Michigan homeowners.

The new laws include new education standards, as well as fingerprinting and background checks. Loan originators will also be required to register with the federal Nationwide Mortgage Licensing System and Registry.

Mortgage loan officers must be licensed under the new system by July 31, 2010.



TIP: Michigan homeowners facing mortgage problems can call the MSHDA Foreclosure Prevention Hotline at 1-866-946-7432.

Senate highlights child safety

Sometimes, hazards in the home aren't obvious. Last fall, I co-sponsored **Senate Resolution 92** to let

people know about the hidden dangers that window blind and shade cords can pose for young children.

Since 1990, more than 200 infants and tots have died from accidental strangling in window cords. These tragic accidents have happened both at home and in day care centers.

More cordless window treatments are available, but safety concerns remain. In fact, 50 million roll-up blinds and roman shades were recalled in December.

You can get information and order a free retro kit at www.windowcoverings.org.



TIP: Keep your family safe. Access the "one-stop shop" for U.S. government recalls at www.recalls.gov.

Pappageorge supports Medicaid fraud reform

A Senate bill helped jumpstart executive action to shine a light on Medicaid spending and root out fraud, waste and abuse.

Senate Bill 942 and House Bill 5542, introduced last year, would create a Michigan Office of Medicaid Inspector General to oversee and audit the Medicaid system. The governor recently announced the creation of a similar office.

An estimated 10 percent of Michigan's \$10 billion Medicaid budget is tainted by scams and waste. A similar office created in New York recovered \$551 million in 2008.

I look forward to following these bills through the process. It's important to keep this officer in statute to prevent a future elimination of the post.

In this economy, it's more important than ever to account for every dollar. We must do all we can to stop criminals who brazenly cheat consumers and taxpayers.

TIP: The Attorney General's Office investigates potential fraud. Call the Health Care Fraud Division Hotline at 800-24-ABUSE to report any concerns.

Pappageorge supports vehicle donation credit extension

Are you in the market for a new vehicle? You can donate your used car to charity and still get a break on your Michigan income tax.

Public Act 195 of 2009 (**Senate Bill 563**) extends a tax credit of up to \$50 (or \$100 for married couples filing a joint return) for donating a vehicle to a qualified charity. The credit was set to expire at the end of 2009.

To be able to claim the credit, you must get a Donor Tax Credit Certificate for Donated Vehicle from the charity.

I gladly supported this bill. The incentive is a benefit to donors and the charities that help people in need of a car for work.

TIP: All vehicle donation charities are not the same! Find a list of qualified organizations on the Michigan Schedule 1 Additions and Subtractions income tax form.

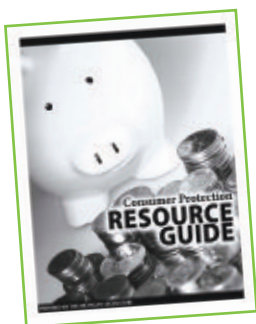


CONSUMER PROTECTION RESOURCES

Keep this quick guide to helpful phone numbers and websites handy.

Note: Phone numbers and website addresses are subject to change.

- For advice on avoiding consumer scams and rip-offs and other consumer news, visit the Federal Trade Commission website at www.ftc.gov. File a complaint online or call 1-877-FTC-HELP.
- Visit the consumer section at www.insurancefraud.org to learn about insurance scams and how to avoid them.
- Learn how to protect your personal information, and manage your money better at www.mymoney.gov.
- Get practical tips to guard against Internet fraud at www.OnGuardOnline.gov.
- Visit <http://postalinspectors.uspis.gov> to learn about mail fraud and theft.
- Stay informed about product safety news, including toy hazard recalls, at the Consumer Product Safety Commission website at www.cpsc.gov. Or call 1-800-638-2772.
- Access the “one-stop shop” for U.S. government recalls at www.recalls.gov.
- Eliminate most telemarketing calls. Sign up for the National Do-Not-Call Registry from your home phone at 1-888-382-1222 or online at www.donotcall.gov.
- Read about the latest Internet schemes identified by the FBI and the National White Collar Crime Center at www.ic3.gov/.
- Get the facts on how to invest wisely and avoid fraud at www.sec.gov/investor.shtml.
- Stop unsolicited prescreened credit card offers. Call 1-888-5OPT-OUT (1-888-567-8688).
- Monitor your credit report on a regular basis to make sure only the accounts you’ve started are listed. To order your free annual credit report, call 1-877-322-8228 or go online to www.annualcreditreport.com.
- Check out a business or charity at the Better Business Bureau of Western Michigan website at www.westernmichigan.bbb.org. Or call 616-774-8236. (BBB of Detroit & Eastern Michigan website at www.easternmichiganbbb.org. Or call 248-223-9400).
- Having trouble paying your mortgage? Find information at www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/foreclosure or call the MSHDA Foreclosure Prevention Hotline at 866-946-7432.
- For help in deciphering monthly telephone charges, access the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) consumer bulletin, Understanding Your Telephone Bill, at <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/understanding.html>.
- The state of Michigan holds millions of dollars in lost or forgotten assets from dormant bank accounts, uncashed checks, valuables in safe deposit boxes and stock certificates. Find out if you have unclaimed property at www.michigan.gov/treasury.
- Even in tough economic times, Michigan citizens give generously to help others in need. Whether your donations help people in local communities or around the world, it’s important to know how your money will be used. Find a list of licensed charities and more at www.michigan.gov/ag. Click on Charities on the right sidebar.



Click on the book to access the newly revised **Consumer Protection Resource Guide**, or contact my office for a print copy. This book has everything you need to know about consumer rights and Michigan law: how to protect yourself from consumer fraud and how to take legal action.